

Better Than Life

by anoesis

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes: This little piece was originally created as a gift for Sixpence Jones at the sshg_newbies Newbie Fest at LiveJournal.

Considering that Hermione had lived in one little room for the past two years, it was amazing how far her belongings had spread throughout the ramshackle house. Her books were in the bathroom, her pens and notebooks in the living room and her hair ties were scattered liberally across every floor.

A simple Accio could have saved her the torturous effort of traipsing from room to hostile room, but her magic, the one thing she had always been able to rely on, had suddenly upped and left when she needed it most.

It seemed as if *everything* was siding with Ron.

She moved cautiously through the house, gathering up what she could. Doubtless someone would follow behind her, removing every last trace of her hurried departure. The way things were at the moment, she could only hope that they wouldn't decide to Vanish it there and then. Hermione had been aware of Molly's vindictive streak long before Bellatrix Lestrange had been cursed into dust. Tiny Easter eggs had been only the beginning of the Weasley matriarch's passive-aggressive arsenal.

Just thinking about Molly's reaction to her latest transgression caused the tears to bubble up again, hot and fat, spilling easily despite her having cried on and off for the last three hours. Hermione scrubbed at her face with a damp tissue, determined to stop; so far she had only managed to give herself a hideous headache on top of her growing heartache.

Returning to the room that she had shared with her boyfriend *her fiancé* until that morning, she found it cold and empty, her old trunk standing open by the bed. She dumped her armful of belongings on top of her of half-forgotten school possessions.

Looking up, she saw Ginny watching her coolly from the doorway.

"I'm not sure that you get to be this upset," her never-quite-a-sister huffed. "Not when you're the one leaving him."

Hermione sighed, wondering how to explain that she was going to miss her best friend, even if she couldn't regret splitting up with him. He had been a part of her life for so long that she was sure that she would be lost without him, even if she knew that she couldn't live one second longer *with* him. That she already knew that she would never find another man who would ever know her quite as well, who had shared so many of the defining moments of her past and had already seen her at her worst, but believed in everything she could be. She wasn't sure that Ginny pretty, graceful Ginny could understand, and even if she could, Hermione knew that she deserved no such sympathy.

"I know, Gin."

Ginny folded her arms across her chest. "Harry's on his way back."

Because Harry would solve things that was the hope. Harry solved *everything*.

Strangely, Hermione had no interest in being fixed.

"I can't talk to him just yet. Would you tell him that I'll get in touch when things have calmed down?" Ginny's face remained impassive, her eyes hard. "Ginny, I still love you. I still love *him*. I just can't do it this way. I know you can't forgive me yet..."

"No, you're right, I can't," Ginny snapped, not allowing her to finish. "I'll tell Harry you want some time."

Hermione tapped the trunk with her wand; the Locomotor Spell faltered, but at least the trunk was lighter than before. She dragged it down the stairs, grateful when the slamming of Ginny's door signalled the end of the Weasley input into her betrayal. Reaching the fireplace, she took a handful of Floo powder and carefully enunciated an address she hadn't uttered in months.

The flames burned green, and she stepped forward, away from the world that had sheltered her since war had ended.

Her parents' house was musty and cold.

A dead plant had shed its leaves all over the carpet and formed a sticky mess underfoot. With her charmwork still a little dicey, Hermione opened all the windows, coaxed the heating back into life and reacquainted herself with the finer workings of the vacuum cleaner.

The walk to the supermarket was longer than she remembered, and the weight of the bags on the return journey seemed to increase with each step. Hermione knew she ought to have been a bit more restrained when it came to shopping, but it was the first time she had actually shopped for herself. Those few times during the Lost Year hadn't really counted, not like this. That had been baked beans and tins of soup, anything that could be heated easily with a charm. There hadn't been time for Penguins, Jaffa Cakes and Monster Munch, nor for spaghetti hoops, potato waffles or microwave pizza.

A tent with bunk beds was all well and good, but Hermione would quite happily have exchanged any amount of magical whimsy for a functioning microwave and a pitch near a handy Iceland.

She had quite enjoyed the shopping, although she might be tempted to take a taxi home in the future. Or buy a little less. Perhaps five different type of curry had been a bit unnecessary, but after almost a decade in a world of Lancashire Hotpots and steak and kidney pie, a little dopiaza whatever that might be would probably do her the world of good.

There were no owls waiting for her when she got back, and Hermione was able to put away her purchases in peace. Having her own kitchen was rather nice, too. There was no feeling that she was underfoot or that she was somehow doing things incorrectly, even if the magnets on the fridge door made her want to cry. With a newfound pragmatism, the holiday mementoes were carefully stowed away in the cupboard beneath the sink, and a dusty bottle of Jif was sprayed liberally at the smudges they left behind.

Once the fridge door was clean, it seemed lazy not to tackle the fridge itself. Then the cupboards. And the sink. Hermione cleaned everywhere by hand, her wand lying forgotten on the table, the chemical smell of the kitchen spray like an old friend.

As usual the distraction of actually doing something worked its soothing magic and by the time she had finished it was dark outside, and the house was ablaze with electric light.

There still weren't any owls.

Her parents' old house had seemed like such an ideal bolthole that Hermione had given little thought to what it might actually be like to return there, especially alone. Especially when feeling a trifle less *emotionally robust* than usual. It wasn't until the various fits of cleaning, crying and shopping had worn themselves out that she realised that coming home might be cause for heartache all of its own. It was a bit hard to ignore how alone you really were when you actually were all on your own.

Thankfully the cleaning had used a healthy chunk of time, and by the time the under-stairs cupboard had been rearranged, it was already late into the night. Finally conceding defeat, Hermione climbed the stairs to bed.

Hermione stood in the doorway of her old room and looked around. The room where she had frantically packed, unpacked, checked and repacked that beaded bag at least twenty times. Her books on the low shelves, an abandoned teddy bear sat on the window sill, untouched since her last night there. Her old blue sheets still neatly covering the bed. They'd made the room look so sophisticated when she was seventeen, yet somehow she'd managed to forget all about them.

On a whim she stepped forwards and reached under the pillow. Hidden underneath were her old pyjamas, still carefully folded. She pulled them out and gazed fondly at the navy blue shorts and vest top that had once been a Christmas gift from her parents, her first adult pyjamas. She'd felt so mature in them. She'd worn them the night before she cursed her parents, in a pathetic attempt to convince herself that she was grown up enough to survive without them. There was the slightest hint of lace around the neckline of the vest. They were cute, really. They had been hidden under that pillow for almost two years.

Hermione knew that the girl who had worn them would have shuddered at the thought of putting them back on without a good wash first. But then, that girl was nothing like the person she had become. Yes, she'd known danger, but never despair. She'd had parents, even if their safety plagued her. For goodness sake, she'd been a virgin schoolgirl who had never known worse pain than the cruelty of schoolchildren and a shallow hex to the chest. A lot had changed since then.

Unceremoniously shucking her clothes, she pulled on the little set and curled up in bed, pretending she was that girl again.

There were no owls waiting for her as she stumbled into the kitchen the next afternoon.

Her magic seemed to have returned overnight, but Hermione carried on her campaign against the house's neglect by hand, radio blaring in the background. She was tired and dirty by the time she reached the front room and regarded the large trunk standing forgotten by the fireplace.

It was tempting to hide the trunk away, for the moment at least, and let herself forget that part of her life for a while. It certainly wasn't practical to start emptying it onto the living room floor there and then, but Hermione had a feeling that her courage might not survive the awkward trip upstairs with the cumbersome thing.

As it was, her resolve almost crumbled the moment she lifted the lid. The clothes piled on top smelled like the Burrow. They smelled like Ron or the enveloping, woolly hug of any given Weasley. Just the scent, clinging to her crumpled clothes, was enough to cause tears to prick against her eyelids. *Home love belonging lost*.

She buried her face in a jumper and wondered if perhaps she hadn't just made the biggest mistake of her life.

Thankfully the washing machine still seemed to be operational. She wasn't certain how robes might react to a spin cycle, but after discovering a few dusty-looking bottles of wine unopened in the sideboard, she decided she didn't really mind.

Pouring herself a glass, she made her way back to the front room and dug a little deeper into the chest. It had never really been unpacked as she'd never really had a place to put anything. Parchment and spell books seemed ridiculous sitting on her computer desk at home. In the Burrow there had hardly been room for her, let alone six years' worth of accumulated essays.

Looking over them now, it came as something of a shock to realise that she hadn't written anything in a long time. It used to be that her fingers were permanently smudged with ink and that there was always a book that she simply *had* to read. How long had it been since she had felt that heading-off-on-a-quest sensation of researching a new topic?

Going through her old belongings, Hermione was aware of a growing sense of nostalgia and discomfort. There were her knitting needles, the only sign that she had ever hoped to campaign for magical equality. Here was a birthday card, signed by a boy who had been caught by an errant hex during the Final Battle. There an essay, harshly graded by a teacher who had bled to death in front of her.

The bag of Gobstones made her smile. She wasn't sure if Harry or Ron had ever noticed that she left them on Wednesday nights, bag in hand, to pursue other friendships. It hadn't lasted she'd hated getting dirty too much to really practice and had disliked not being as good as the other players. Her parents had been thrilled when she had told them that she had joined a club. Her father had laughed himself silly when he'd realised how the game differed from the Muggle marbles he had hoarded as a child. That seemed a lifetime ago.

Hermione's hand closed around a brightly coloured cardboard box, and she found herself smiling. It was the Daydream Charm gifted to her by the Weasley twins when they had visited the shop, en masse, that time in Diagon Alley when buying school supplies. She'd studied it closely when she had got it home, trying to work out the charms involved. She'd never even considered using it, especially once she'd established that some sort of potion had been employed in its creation, which had struck her Muggle-raised mind as being slightly too close to a hallucinogenic, like LSD. Still, despite their cavalier attitude to schoolwork, the Weasleys had become rather responsible once they had opened their shop Ministry Regulations had seen to that. It was probably safe. Safer than their Skiving Snackboxes, at least.

She put it aside with a sigh. It had probably expired by now. It was a shame if anyone could do with a little break from reality, it was her.

By this time there was not much left but rubbish in the trunk, just a few broken quills, oddments of parchment and a few Biro pens. Hermione, feeling tired and a little dejected, Vanished the lot and closed the lid.

She put another load of washing in and microwaved a pasta bake for her tea. She then feeling curiously akin with Arthur Weasley attempted microwaving a Wagon Wheel, just to see. The hot marshmallow pushed the biscuits apart and filled the kitchen with the smell of burning sugar. It was just a shame it tasted foul. Hoping that six o'clock wasn't too early to change back into her pyjamas, she poured herself another glass of wine and headed to the sofa, Summoning her duvet as she went.

The TV was useless. Hermione found she didn't recognise half the characters in any of the soaps. She'd missed enough Christmas specials for all her favourite characters to have died unusual deaths. She had become a stranger to the world that had raised her.

Pouring herself another glass of wine, Hermione realised she that had emptied the bottle.

No one had tried to contact her, for once doing as she asked. Strangely she found it didn't stop her wishing that they might have ignored her request and tried to check up on her anyway. Anything could have happened to her.

Except that it wouldn't. Remove Harry and Ron from the equation, and nothing ever happened to Hermione Granger.

Bored, lonely and a little drunk, she pulled the battered Daydream Charm towards her and stared at the handsome pirate on the box. Would it work? An evening with a pirate captain would certainly be better than an evening of solitary drinking. Slight drooling wasn't going to be an issue with no one to see her. An hour's daydream and then, if there was still nothing on TV, she would go and have a bath. The luxury of being able to spend more than ten minutes in a bathroom without someone banging on the door was tempting.

With very little to lose, she opened the box and inhaled.

Well, that was unpleasant.

There was no spinning or squishing she would normally associate with magical travel, but there was a sudden sense of displacement, as if she'd just missed a step. Her stomach lurched, and she held out her hands to steady herself.

Before she could get her bearings, a sudden burst of light exploded into her vision. Hermione ducked, feeling the jinx as it whistled past her, then turned to glare at her assailant.

There was no pirate in a ruffled shirt, but Hermione was a bit too preoccupied to mind. Once the light had faded, she found herself staring into a hauntingly familiar pair of dark eyes.

Which was rather unexpected.

Even knowing it was just a potions- and charm-induced hallucination didn't make seeing him again any less of a jolt.

Why Snape? she wondered. *Out of all the things I might have imagined, why him?*

He was glaring at her, which seemed fairly likely, and his wand was raised ready to hex again. "How did you find me?" he demanded.

Ignoring the wand hovering beneath her nose, Hermione glanced around in interest. There was no pirate ship, no medieval castle, no gorgeous sunset. Instead she seemed to be in a large dimly lit warehouse with ceiling-high metal racking, stacked with pallets.

"Well, I suppose I can't be too disappointed if my own subconscious brought me here," she reasoned, "but you'd think I would have imagined you somewhere warm. This place smells like mushrooms."

The wand wavered, then dropped. Glancing back, she realised that Snape was looking at her with some concern.

"What are you wearing?" he asked.

She looked down at the skimpy pyjama set and frowned. "That doesn't seem right. I'd rather be wearing a pretty frock. What a rubbish charm." She considered. "Unless it's an unexpected sexual element to the fantasy. I want you to see me as a woman, ergo the charm brings me to you in a way that means you can't ignore my womanly bits."

"Bits?"

"My nipples are almost poking through the fabric," she explained helpfully.

A shrugged-off cloak was hastily wrapped around her shoulders.

"Miss Granger, am I right in thinking that you believe you are dreaming?"

"Well, obviously!" she agreed. "I mean, you're dead which is the first clue that this isn't real. You're actually listening to me which is another. I'm guessing that this is another

if 'only I'd been able to save Professor Snape' dream, only we're a few months down the line. Obviously pirates and cabin sex were too much even for my brain, and instead I saddled myself with freezing simply so I could be the first one to find you."

He stared at her incredulously before a loud noise made them both start. Before Hermione could demand what on earth that had been, a large gloved hand covered her mouth, and she was being dragged through a low door and into a different part of the warehouse, this time smelling of stale beer.

When they were well away from the source of the noise, Snape pulled her down behind a convenient stack of wooden crates and removed his hand from her mouth.

"What are we doing?" Hermione asked.

"We're on the run," he replied. "Now shush."

Such was her programmed response to the man that Hermione shushed, even though it was *her* dream, thank you.

There were shouts and crashes from the far end of the warehouse, which caused her to forget all about shushing as she stood on tip toes to peer over the crates. Sparks of wand light illuminated the racking, sending strange shadows chasing across the ceiling. "Who are they?" she asked.

"Dark wizards."

"Death Eaters?" Hermione patted her hips futilely before remembering that her wand was still on the kitchen table. Not that this outfit came with pockets. "Balls."

"Not all Dark wizards are Death Eaters. . . ."

It sounded tired and rehearsed and Hermione turned to him in interest. Snape looked exactly like she remembered and yet completely different. Younger, perhaps, and certainly less forbidding. She was suddenly aware just how closely they were standing. He looked remarkably solid for a daydream, and she felt the urge to pinch him, just to see how real he felt. "Why are we sneaking away from Dark wizards?"

"I can't tell you. I'm . . ."

"An Unspeakable?" Hermione hazarded, her brain beginning to whirr. "Let me guess, the Department of Mysteries had something to do with your survival, didn't they?"

"Thankfully someone worked out what Dumbledore was up to and approached me during the final year."

Hermione nodded. "I like it it's all very neat. You survived and have a job that highlights your bravery, resourcefulness and intelligence. I couldn't stand the sort of fantasy where I have to be rescued, and I've never liked sailing. Pirates," she added, seeing his look of confusion. "Instead I find you an *actual* hero that I *actually* admire and get to help you. You can act as if you don't wish for my help, I get to impress upon you just how competent and resourceful I actually am. You agree to let me stay on the grounds that you'll Obliviate me afterwards, and I end up proving that I'm not an insufferable little girl but an intelligent woman, and you realise that you respect me hugely."

"My respect?" he asked, batting her hand away as it reached for his chest. "That's your fantasy?"

"Well, if you'd ever met You while I was at school, then you would understand." She pulled the spice-scented cloak more closely around her shoulders, catching sight, as she did, of the battered carpet slippers on her feet. "I suppose I was hoping for a more sexual element, but I'm having a long bath after this. I can take care of any unresolved tension there."

He swallowed.

In the tense pause in conversation that followed, Hermione could hear the voices beginning to recede.

Snape stood, wand raised. There was something slightly off about the image, and it took Hermione a moment to realise what was missing. He was dressed in trousers and fitted jumper, neither of which produced the slightest ripple or billow as he moved.

"Miss Granger?" he prompted.

"Hermione," she corrected, slightly amused at the look on his face, having caught her staring at his arse.

He looked as if he was about to smile back, but caught himself. "We should go. There are anti-Apparition wards up, so we're going to have to make it past the boundaries." Beckoning her to follow, he stood cautiously, wand raised. "This way."

"Oh, don't feel like you have to leave on my account!" she whispered, scurrying to keep up with him. "I'm perfectly happy staying if there's still work to be done!"

"What about your wand?"

She smiled, oddly pleased that he'd noticed. "Wandless magic's mostly about confidence. This is my dream I'll be amazing at it."

"Look, I don't think I can..." A sudden noise behind them stopped him dead. "Shit." They ducked behind some of the packing crates.

"These crates are all jolly convenient, aren't they?" she mused. "It's funny, I..."

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Hermione heard Snape swear as his wand was plucked from his grasp. She whirled around to be confronted by the sight of a dirty-robed wizard bearing down on them, wand held high. "Whotchoo doing there?" He peered at them more closely, his face darkening. "*Snape?*"

That was my fault, she realised. I was chatting away like a silly girl and put us both in danger. Even if it *were* an imaginary danger, it was still galling to realise that she had played the role of Useless Heroine entirely unprompted.

"Bugger that," she muttered, moving to stand in front of her disarmed companion. There was no way that she was going to allow *him* to save *her*. Reaching down inside, she gathered up all the raw power she could find and...

A job that bored her and drained her in equal measure. Always being in the way. Never having a moment to herself. The feeling that she was having to share her fiancé with a dozen others. Wondering when they would find their own place to live. Waiting for Ron to talk to her. Waiting for Ron to touch her. Falling asleep on her side of the bed with tears in her eyes. Realising that saving what was left of herself would mean losing everyone she held dear. Waiting for owls that might never come.

...Spat it out in a hissing, messy "*Stupify!*"

As she had predicted, the spell worked beautifully, catching the wizard squarely in the chest and sending him flying backwards into the metal struts beyond.

Snape edged round her to approach the fallen wizard. "Good God," he whispered.

"See?" Hermione nodded. "It's like I said. Confidence."

"You . . . you're magnificent." He picked up his fallen wand and turned it on the unconscious wizard. *Confundo*."

Hermione, who was expecting an Obliviate, winced and looked away.

Another shout from behind had Snape dragging her to the door. "Come on!" he insisted. They burst out into the dark, the cold air burning her lungs as she ran. Suddenly his strong arms were around her waist, and Hermione felt herself spinning away into the night.

They landed unsteadily in a rather ungainly heap in what appeared to be a bedsit.

It was quite obviously a bachelor pad. The unwashed dishes by the sink were something of a giveaway. Having lived under Molly Weasley's careful gaze since leaving school, Hermione had never really had the chance to live by herself and do all the normal living-by-yourself things, like leaving the washing up until later, living off takeaway or wearing clothes without laboriously charming out the creases first, and the sight of Snape's dirty dishes made her feel slightly wistful.

An exciting job, his own place, perhaps this daydream was picking up on who she wanted ~~to be~~ as well as who she wanted to do. Which reminded her . . .

"I think I'd like to have sex now."

Snape, who had been midway through a complicated series of wand movements, setting the flat to rights, paused, allowing his discarded clothes to slither back to the floor and the cups to tumble into the sink with a splash. "What?"

"We've done the running around, danger and intrigue. I'd had enough of that before I even got to have sex the first time around." She scratched her nose. "I'm not sure how much more daydream I have left, and I'd hate to miss out."

Hermione had the impression, once again, that he was fighting a smile. "What happened to taking care of that in the bath later?"

"Well, I'm not ruling that out," she answered seriously. "However, it seems like a shame to waste a perfectly good fantasy."

The smile finally split his face. "You're actually serious, aren't you?"

"Yes," she concurred. "You know, you do have a lovely smile. Oh, don't!" she protested as his lips closed tightly over his uneven teeth. "I wouldn't have said it if it wasn't true."

"I'm afraid I don't really trust your judgement at the moment. You can't sincerely believe this is all some sort of hallucination?"

"Of course I do! You called me magnificent not ten minutes ago."

He paused. "That is actually a rather sound argument. However, in my defence..."

"No," Hermione interrupted. "Don't spoil it." She looked around in interest. "If I'm not allowed an orgasm, do you think I might have a cup of tea? I'm still a bit chilly . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course!" He moved to fill the kettle, pausing to flick his wand at the sofa, clearing a patch for her to sit. "I'll get the fire going as well. Would you like something to eat, maybe? Toast?"

"Please." She sat and watched as he moved around the tiny kitchen. "You know, I didn't expect you to be this amenable."

There was a pause so long that Hermione decided that he probably wasn't going to answer and turned her attention back to his little bedsit instead. Perhaps the daydream was starting to wear out. She kicked off the embarrassing slippers and tucked her feet up inside the voluminous folds of the cloak.

"Here." She found herself presented with a large mug of tea and a plate of buttered toast, cut into triangles.

"Thank you." The tea was hot and strong.

Snape sat beside her, balancing his plate on arm of the sofa.

"I was very unhappy when you knew me," he announced suddenly. "I have to say, you've been far more amenable than I would have believed, either."

Hermione sipped her tea. "How do you mean?"

"It's not often that I get to meet someone who isn't already aware of my survival. Unspeakables tend to be somewhat removed from everyday life, so none of them really had much of an opinion of me before I joined them. I wouldn't have expected you to have reacted so calmly to seeing me. Even once you informed me that I was purely imaginary, I still wouldn't have expected you to be so comfortable with me."

"What you said, about wanting my approval," he continued. "It seems so silly, but all I ever wanted was the approval of all of you. Not the students," he explained, "but of the Wizarding world. I like the thought of being someone you *actually* admire."

"You're a hero." Hermione frowned, nibbling on a crust. "Well, you're my hero. And Harry's. Ron never liked you, no matter how often I tried to convince him."

Severus stared at the newly kindled fire as it smoked sullenly. "Did you really dream about saving me?"

"Leaving you in that Shack is one of the biggest regrets of my life," she answered simply. "Although, I've imagined doing a bit more than saving you. I'll show you, if you like. We can start with the mouth-to-mouth."

"That's very tempting." He smiled, his eyes slipping to where the cloak had fallen open to display her impractical pyjamas. "Very tempting. But even if we disregard the part where you think that I'm imaginary and that I'm a good twenty years your senior, there's no future for us. The world thinks I'm dead. I can't offer you anything."

"That's all very noble," Hermione sighed, "but I'm afraid I'm going to insist. I don't mind in the least that you have every intention of Obliviating me afterwards. It's been a thrilling evening, I've had to watch you without your robes covering you for hours now, and if I don't get to see you in even less than that, then I'm going to be very disappointed."

"We aren't just allowed to go around Obliviating whomever we feel like," he argued, ignoring her pointed request that he further disrobe. "They have special task teams for that. And I can't take advantage of a woman who believes herself to be experiencing a hallucination. When you realise that all this is real, you would hate me for it."

"If all of this is real," Hermione conceded, "then it would mean that you had survived the war, are alive and well and doing a job you apparently love. It would also mean that all the lovely things that you've said to me tonight were real. If reality is worrying you, perhaps you should consider that I'm a grown woman, capable of making my own choices. You should also consider that I have just left a long-term relationship and am not looking for any sort of commitment from you, so a one night stand would not leave me sobbing into my pillow, and that I fancy the pants off you."

"You do?"

In response, Hermione carefully placed her mug and plate on the floor next to her slippers, shuffled across the sofa and pressed her lips to his.

The warehouse had been cold, and all that running around without a bra on had been uncomfortable, but it had all added to the incredibly realistic nature of the dream. It was the same with Snape. His jumper was soft under her fingers, his chin was rough with stubble, and his lips were warm and dry against hers.

She half expected him to push her away, but all argument seemed to leave him at roughly the same time that she insinuated her tongue between his lips. After that, he seemed to begin to agree with her wholeheartedly, pulling her closer and kissing her back eagerly.

Hermione shuffled closer towards him until she was almost draped across his lap. She could feel the heat of his hands through the robe she was still wearing and hurried to shrug off the restrictive cloth. When his fingers crept beneath the hem of her top, Hermione couldn't help the pleased sound that began low in her throat. He clutched her tighter then, kissing her searchingly, his breath hot against her skin.

It felt so deliciously easy, kissing Snape. Perhaps it was the complete lack of consequence to her actions or perhaps it was the warmth of the fire and wine she had already drunk, but Hermione didn't feel the least bit self-conscious as she pressed against him. Instead she felt free to relax into the fantasy; indeed, knowing that this was *her* daydream made it easy to stop thinking and simply enjoy each separate sensation that filtered through her drowsy, roiling arousal. As she twined her fingers in his slightly greasy, oh-so-realistic feeling hair, and his lips found the delicate skin at the base of her throat, Hermione sent a silent prayer of thanks to the Weasley twins for letting her have such a moment of unadulterated bliss.

She marvelled again at her subconscious for sending her to Snape of all people. Hermione could honestly say that she had not been aware of any attraction to him when he had been alive, but now, observing him with adult eyes, it was impossible to deny the curiously compelling quality of his dark eyes and long, lean body. No, this was no boy she had grown up beside, but a grown man. There had been no friendship between them that had evolved into something new. Instead he had always been an adult to her, always just beyond her ken. He was a fascinating mix of experience, confidence and in the light of the memories he had gifted to Harry loyalty, bravery and the capacity for deep and utter devotion.

Then his hand moved further inside her flimsy top to capture her breast. His long fingers caught and tweaked her nipple, sending tiny bursts of electric down through her belly, and all thought was lost.

Soon the sofa became a little restrictive, and Hermione slid from his lap and tugged Snape towards the unmade bed.

"I'm not sure when I last changed the sheets," he apologised, flicking his wand at the duvet self-consciously.

Hermione shrugged. "I shouldn't worry about it. My pyjamas are two years old."

"You're a strange woman," he murmured, pulling his jumper over his head and dropping it to the floor.

Snape was no pirate captain with tanned skin and rippling muscles. His body was wiry and pale with bony knees and skinny legs. His mouth was hot and tasted of tea. It was details like that that would have her believe this everything were true. His cock was curved slightly upwards at the tip. It felt heavy and blunt in her hand and, once he finally slid home, completely glorious inside her. Each thrust of his hips seemed to connect with some part of her that made her breath catch in her throat and made her toes curl.

It was quick, rushed, a little uncomfortable, when the sheet rucked up beneath her, and utterly, devastatingly wonderful. Snape's mouth stayed pressed against hers even as her breath began to come in gasps. His long hair slid forward to tickle her face. He whispered her name as he came, holding her as if she were infinitely precious, and then spoilt it all by collapsing on top of her, his sharp chin pressing into her collarbone.

It was impossible to prevent the tears leaking from her eyes and into her hair.

He extricated himself from the tangle of their limbs and arranged himself more comfortably beside her, holding her close. Careful fingers brushed her tears away. "Did I hurt you?"

"Don't be daft," she sniffed. "That was wonderful. I just . . . I just wish all of this were real." She twisted, tightening her arms around him. "This is how I'm going to think of you," she decided. "You didn't die that night. You're out there somewhere, living life on your terms. I don't care how convenient all the packing crates were."

"Daft woman." He traced his still damp fingers across her lips. "Do you want to stay?"

"Yes," she admitted. "But I can't. If I stay any longer, I won't be able to let you go. Even if you are real, you're still a secret. I know this can never be any more than a dream."

"You're right," he conceded, wrapping himself more tightly around her.

After the disarray of Snape's little flat, her parents' front room seemed coldly formal. Her duvet and dirty plate looked like a little island nest in an unfriendly sea. Hermione kicked off her slippers and shuffled forwards.

"Will you be alright?" His solicitous enquiry was really rather touching.

"I'll have a nap here," she replied. "I don't want to spend another night in my old room. You know, I think I might sell this place and find somewhere a little easier to manage. Start over." Stop trying to hide away from things.

Severus picked up the Patented Daydream Charm from its place on the floor. "Do you mind if I take this?"

Hermione snuggled back against the sofa. "Help yourself."

"Will you be alright?" he repeated.

"Goodnight, Severus," she smiled, closing her eyes. His lips pressed briefly to her forehead, and then he was gone.

Her neck was stiff, and Hermione was fairly certain that she had fallen asleep on top of the TV remote. It felt as if it had left an interesting pattern of indentation against her ribs. She blinked grittily, wondering what had woken her, when the doorbell sounded again.

She shuffled gracelessly to the front door and opened it carefully. Thanks to her insistence that the house be connected to the Floo, the front door was rarely used and had a tendency to stick. Finally she worked the door open and peered outside at the figure standing uneasily on the welcome mat.

It was Snape.

"Have you come to take my memories?" Hermione asked.

"Not exactly," he answered. "It's a little awkward. I've come to invite you to a job interview."

Of all the things he could have answered, that was not what she had been expecting. For a moment she wondered if perhaps the charm she had ingested was still at play. "What?"

"I told my superiors about your wandless magic during my debriefing. They're interested in meeting you."

Hermione looked down at her crumpled vest top. Her nipples were still plainly visible through the cloth. "Now?"

"When you're ready," he assured her. "Hermione, do you . . . Do you think that I might take you to dinner?"

"That depends." In the cold light of day, he looked . . . well, pretty much the same as he had the night before. Hook nosed, sallow skinned and utterly compelling. "Do you still think that I'm magnificent?"

He nodded.

The vestibule seemed a little less imposing with him standing in it, Hermione realised. Almost like a liveable space.

"Alright, then," she agreed. "But I get to treat you to breakfast."